

Immigration Advocates Asking Business Leaders for Push

By Michael C. Bender Mar 28, 2014 11:43 AM CT

Republicans favoring a broad revision of U.S. [immigration](#) policies are questioning why business groups aren't doing more to force the issue with the party's majority in the House of Representatives.

"It's been very soft, and we want them to go a little bit stronger," said Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a [Florida](#) Republican in favor of easing immigration laws.

These Republicans say the party faces greater pressure to act quickly, particularly as President [Barack Obama](#) indicates he may curry favor with Hispanic voters by dialing back deportations that are averaging about [1,000 a day](#), more than under any other president. Such a move would jeopardize any remaining chance this year to pass immigration legislation sought by companies from [Microsoft \(MSFT\)](#) to [Caterpillar \(CAT\)](#)

"That would kill it," Senator Orrin Hatch, a Utah Republican, said of an executive act to decrease deportations.

A comprehensive immigration bill Hatch helped craft that the Senate approved with bipartisan support last June expires Jan. 3 without action by the Republican-controlled House. The measure includes an expansion of worker visas sought by many businesses, including the tech industry.

House Speaker John Boehner, an Ohio Republican, has put a hold on his framework for immigration legislation amid signs it would divide his party ahead of November's elections.

"Unfortunately, those of us who want immigration reform don't control the House," said Senator Jeff Flake, an [Arizona](#) Republican who helped write the Senate bill.

'Physically Tackling'

Business groups have helped advance the issue, and are still meeting with lawmakers to push for changes, said Carl Guardino, president chief executive officer of Silicon Valley Leadership Group, a San Jose, California-based group.

"Other than physically tackling a member of Congress, which is probably against the law, I'm not sure how much more aggressive we can be," Guardino said at a Bloomberg Government event yesterday. "What we cannot do is go on to the House floor and vote for them."

Representative Greg Walden, an Oregon Republican in charge of his party's 2014 House races, said in February that action in the chamber this year on immigration policy may have to wait

until after most state deadlines pass for candidates to file to challenge incumbent lawmakers in party primaries.

“It’s not a question of if we fix our broken immigration laws, it’s really a question of when,” Representative Paul Ryan, the 2012 Republican nominee for vice president, [said](#) this week at a U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce event in [Washington](#).

Visa Cap

A stark reminder for businesses about the lack of an immigration bill will come April 1, the start of an annual rush for highly skilled worker visas. The cap of 65,000 on the H-1B visas will probably be reached by [April 7](#), according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The Senate bill would raise that cap to 115,000, and allow for as many as 180,000, depending on economic conditions.

Employment-based immigration changes that open borders to highly skilled immigrants would add about 3.2 percentage points to real gross domestic product in the next 10 years, a “boon” for the world’s biggest economy, according to a report from Beth Ann Bovino, chief U.S. economist for Standard & Poors.

“Business has a lot to lose, and they have to take stock of pressure they’re applying to House Republicans,” said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, a Washington-based group that works with businesses.

Lobbying Duel

Business lobby tactics have come under scrutiny as their economic message comes up short against more emotional letter-writing and phone-call campaigns from anti-immigration groups including Arlington, Virginia-based NumbersUSA. The only Republicans to mention immigration in campaign ads this year, including newly elected Representative David Jolly in Florida, have done so to highlight support for stricter border security.

“We need them to weigh in heavily with members of Congress in order to take up the legislation,” Senator John McCain, an Arizona Republican who helped craft his chamber’s bill, said of the business lobby.

FWD.us, one of the few business groups aggressively pushing the issue, is a pro-immigration organization started by [Facebook Inc. \(FB\)](#) Chief Executive Officer [Mark Zuckerberg](#).

The group distributed a lengthy memo to lawmakers this year with a section entitled “The Shocking Extremism Behind Anti-Immigrant Groups.” An affiliate, Council for American Job Group, aired a [television ad](#) for two weeks this month that told viewers the nation’s future “is tied to immigration reform.”

“Call House Republicans today,” the ad’s narrator says. “Tell them, ‘We’ve waited long enough. Pass immigration reform.’”

Funding Sought

Jonathan Nelson, who runs Hackers and Founders, a Silicon Valley-based social network of 12,000 software engineers and investors, said he’s seeking funding for a two-week campaign to pressure pro-immigration Republicans with phone calls and letters from within their districts.

Nelson helped organize opposition in 2012 to proposed anti-piracy laws in Congress, a successful campaign that included service blackouts from Wikipedia and [Google. \(GOOG\)](#)

“If you fixed immigration, you’d have tens of thousands of companies start,” Nelson said in an interview.

Still, tech companies and business groups have largely maintained a low-key approach.

Private Meetings

Guardino said his Silicon Valley group this week met privately with 64 House and Senate lawmakers, mostly Republicans, including House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy of [California](#), to discuss the issue. Last week, [Oracle \(ORCL\)](#) Chief Financial Officer Safra Catz hosted a fundraiser for House Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte, a Virginia Republican whose committee is a crucial stop for immigration legislation.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce organized an hour-long briefing yesterday for congressional staff with demographers whose research shows that easing immigration laws would help address a labor gap in the U.S.

Randel Johnson, the chamber’s senior vice president for labor and immigration issues, defended the tactics of business groups, saying they’re pushing the House to take up legislation before the August recess or in the two months following the elections and before the new Congress is sworn in. “We’re light years ahead of where we used to be,” he said.

Church Groups

Using more aggressive tactics in the push for revising immigration policy have been labor groups, including the AFL-CIO, and church organizations, who have spotlighted the spike in deportations under the Obama administration to organize protests of Republicans and Democrats.

“The economic benefit of immigration reform will be lost for the foreseeable future if the president acts executively,” Noorani said.

Staff members for Obama and top Senate Democrats discussed possible executive actions to suspend some deportations at a private meeting on March 11. Two days later, Obama told

Hispanic House members that his administration is reviewing deportation practices to “see how it can conduct enforcement more humanely within the confines of the law,” according to a White House statement at the time.

Obama’s approval rating among Hispanics has dropped [22 points](#) since last May to 51 percent, according to Gallup polling. He won 71 percent of the bloc’s vote in 2012.

Ryan, during his speech to the Hispanic chamber, sought the group’s help in getting legislation passed.

“It only works if you tell us what you think,” Ryan said. “It’s a participation sport. It’s a contact sport, too.”

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-03-28/immigration-advocates-asking-business-leaders-for-push.html>